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Old Symbol in Contemporary Culture

Turkish Evil Eye Bead – from Ancient Amulets to Commercial Gifts

Travelling across Turkey, wherever you look, you'll meet plenty of eyes made of glass gazing at you. All over the country tourists can see round, dark blue pendants with a blue or black dot superimposed on a white or yellow center, suggestive of an eye. One can see these pendants everywhere, in shops and markets, hanging from doorways in the home or office or from the rear view mirror. These "eyes" are worn in the form of jewelry, attached to bracelets, a part of necklace or earring, or pinned to clothes. They appear in many sizes, from small key rings to necklaces to large ceramic eyes for hanging up in the home. Turks call these pendants *nazar boncuğu* or *nazarlık*. The word *nazar* is derived from the Arabic نظر, *sight* or *seeing*, while Turkish word *boncuğu* means "amulet". Both the name of the pendant and its shape of eye are closely related to its symbolic meaning and function. The reason behind the production of *nazar boncuğu* is the *nazar* belief. A *nazar* is born of the age-old "evil eye" superstition. The *Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines "evil eye" as "an eye or glance held capable of inflicting harm" and also as "a person believed to have such an eye or glance."¹

To prevent the power of "evil eye", Anatolian artisans have for millennia created blue glass "eyes" that "look" straight back at the spell-caster and in this way protect the owner of the talisman. According to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, the talismans

¹ "Evil eye", *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, [on line] <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/evil%20eye>, 20 January 2015.

created to protect against the evil eye are also frequently called “evil eyes.”² In this article, I will use the term *nazar boncuğu* and “evil eye” interchangeably.

Attempts to ward off the curse of the evil eye have resulted in a number of talismans in many cultures. As a class, they are called *apotropaic* (Greek for “protective”, literally: “turns away”) talismans, meaning that they turn away or turn back harm. Disks or balls, consisting of concentric blue and white circles representing an evil eye are common talismans in the Middle East, found on the prows of Mediterranean boats and elsewhere. Widely used all across Turkey, pendants known as *nazar boncuğu* are one of this kind of *apotropaic* talisman, the means of keeping at bay the ills brought on by envious and greedy eyes. It is a both cultural object and glass handicraft. The aim of this article is to trace the origin of *nazar*, one of the most popular symbols circulating within the Turkish culture, and to show its place in the context of contemporary culture and globalization. I would argue that today, the evil eye bead called *nazar boncuğu* still has powerful influence in modern Turkish life, pop culture and design. It is still used as a talisman but it also used as an accessory or a decorative object.

The origin of the amulet protecting against “evil eye”

Since ancient times the eye figure has been regarded as a strong charm against evil in many cultures and belief systems. It appeared amongst the ancient Egyptians and Sumerians, in ancient Greece and Rome, in Jewish, Islamic, and Hindu traditions, as well as in peasant, and other folk societies. Belief in the “evil eye” is strongest in the Middle East and South Asia. It has also spread to other areas, including northern Europe, particularly in the Celtic regions, and the Americas, where it was brought by European colonists and Middle Eastern immigrants. The idea of the “evil eye” appears several times in translations of the Old Testament.³

The concept of “evil eye” is also known in most languages: in Persian as *chashm zakhm* (“eye caused injury”) or *chashm-e bad* (“bad eye”), in Hebrew as *áyin hā-rá*, in Yiddish *aynora*, in Hungarian *szemmel veres* (“beating with eyes”), in Sicilian *jettatura* (“casting”), in French *mauvais oeil*, in Spanish *mal de ojo* (“the eye’s curse”). Greek word *matiasma* or *mati* refers to the act of cursing someone with the “evil eye”.

The “evil eye” is often thought to stem from envy and malice toward prosperity and beauty, and thus in many cultures, unguarded praise of one’s possessions or children is thought to invite misfortune. Measures taken to ward off the “evil eye” vary widely between cultures. Safeguards include the wearing of amulets, numbers, or abstract signs and sacred texts. In Asia children may have their faces blackened

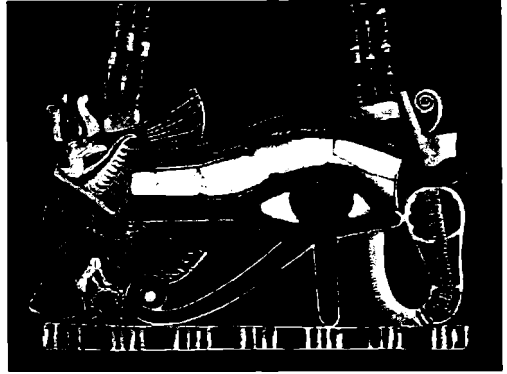
² “Evil eye”, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, [on line] <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/197336/evil-eye>, 20 January 2015.

³ R. Ulmer, *The Evil Eye in the Bible and in Rabbinic Literature*, Hoboken 1994, p. 176.

for protection; some authorities in India suggest that the purpose of ritual cross-dressing is to avert the “evil eye”.⁴

However, the most common means of protection is the figure of eye itself. Since ancient times, in many cultures the eye symbolizes watchfulness/vigilance, care and concern, the power of God, and light, which is able to remove poverty and ignorance.⁵ In ancient Egypt there were seven different hieroglyphs used to represent the eye, most commonly “ir.t”, which also has

the meaning “to make or do” or “one who does”. This meaning is connected with the Egyptian belief that the eye was not a passive organ of sight but more an agent of action, protection or wrath. One of these hieroglyphs, “Eye of Horus”, was both a hieroglyph and a powerful symbol of royal protection and good health. Horus was an ancient a sky god whose eyes were said to be the sun and the moon. It is believed that when Horus opened its eyes the world was enlightened; when he closed them, it became dark. An ancient myth describes a battle between Horus and Set (god of disorder) in which Horus’ right eye was torn out. The Goddess Hathor magically restored its lost eye. Hence, the “Eye of Horus” was often used as a symbol of healing, it was believed to have healing and protective power, and it was used as a protective amulet.⁶ However, it was also known as the “Eye of Ra”, a powerful destructive force linked with the fierce heat of the sun as the personification of goddess Wadjet.⁷ This symbol was frequently used in jewelry to ensure the safety and health of the bearer and provide wisdom and prosperity. Funerary amulets were often made in the shape of the Eye of Horus.⁸ Ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern sailors would frequently paint the symbol on the bow of their vessel to ensure safe sea travel.⁹



1. A Wedjat/Udjat ‘Eye of Horus’ pendant, Cairo Museum.

Author: Jon Bodsworth. Source: [on line] [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wedjat_\(Udjat\)_Eye_of_Horus_pendant.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wedjat_(Udjat)_Eye_of_Horus_pendant.jpg), December 2, 2015

From Egypt, the eye talisman spread to the Mediterranean, Middle East and Europe. The belief in the “evil eye” in the period of classical antiquity is referenced by many writers, philosophers and historians, such as Hesiod, Plato, Plutarch, Pliny

⁴ “Evil eye”, *Encyclopædia Britannica*...

⁵ W. Kopaliński, *Słownik symboli*, p. 275.

⁶ G. Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology. A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford 2004, pp. 131-132.

⁷ D. Silverman, *Ancient Egypt*, Duncan Baird Publishers, 1997, p. 228.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 228.

⁹ Ch. Freeman, *The Legacy of Ancient Egypt*, New York 1997, p. 91.

the Elder. Peter Walcot's *Envy and the Greeks* (1978) listed more than one hundred works by these and other authors mentioning the evil eye.¹⁰

The conviction that someone, just by looking, can cause harm to another person, animal or object was also known in ancient Mesopotamia.¹¹ Here clay tablets have been discovered referring to plagues with the figure of eyes resembling Turkish *nazar*. German ophthalmologist Siegfried Seligman, who published a classic study concerning this phenomenon, stated plainly that "evil eye" was frequently referred to in Assyrian and Babylonian texts.¹²

In the Achaemenid era, "eye stones" were used either as the eyes of statues or as amulets to repel the evil eye. These "eye stones" have been discovered at the ancient town of Parsa near Persepolis.¹³ The Persian form of amulet is associated with the development of glass making.¹⁴ Written documents and extant beads date as early as the 16th century BC. Glass beads were made and widely used throughout the ancient world, from Mesopotamia to Egypt, from Phoenicia to Persia, and throughout the Roman imperial period.¹⁵

Nazar boncuğu and its craft tradition in Turkey

The art of *nazar boncuğu* making in Turkey is an extension of Near Eastern tradition of glass making which dates back over 5000 years ago.¹⁶ This art arrived in Ottoman Western Anatolia thanks to the Arabian craftsmen who settled in İzmir during the decline of Ottoman Empire, in the last quarter of 19th century. These craftsmen started glass production in the furnaces they set up in Kemeraltı Bazaar. *Nazar boncuğu* is handicraft made of molten glass which is heated in kilns called "ocak" and shaped with a certain set of iron tools. While the molten beads are wrapped around a thick iron tool, a thin one is used to make eye symbols. In this way, a craftsman can produce 500 to 1000 beads in a day.¹⁷

¹⁰ P. Walcot, *Envy and the Greeks. A Study of Human Behaviour*, Warminster 1978.

¹¹ M.-L. Thomsen, "The Evil Eye in Mesopotamia", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 51, 1992 no. 1, pp. 19-32.

¹² S. Seligman, *Der böse Blick*, vol. 1, Berlin 1910, p. 12.

¹³ H. Golpira, *Parsa Emerges from the Shadow of Persepolis*, [on line] http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Parsa_Emerges_from_the_Shadow_of_Persepolis.htm, 12 February 2015.

¹⁴ As for the art of glass, glass beads are the earliest objects surviving to present day.

¹⁵ R.T. Marchese, *The Fabric of Life. Cultural Transformations in Turkish Society*, Binghamton 2005, pp. 103-107.

¹⁶ According to scientific researches, glass making is estimated to emerge in late 3000 B.C. in Mesopotamia. Glass making rapidly spread across near east due to the abundance of raw materials (i.e. sand).

¹⁷ Purple, white, yellow, blue, green, brown and red are the colors used in *nazar boncuğu* production. T. Sode, "Traditional Glass-Beadmakers in Turkey", [in:] *International Bead and Beadwork Conference*, J. Allen, H. Valerie (eds.), İstanbul 2007.

The main fuel for these furnaces is pitch-pine wood. During the first quarter of 20th century, the beadmakers who practised their arts at the Araphan and Kemeralti districts of Izmir, had to leave there due to the disturbance of the smoke from their furnace and risk of fire in the neighborhood. They moved to Görece and Kurudere, regions where pine wood is abundant.¹⁸ Today, *nazar boncuğu* production is concentrated in the Görece neighborhood of Menderes and the Nazarköy (Kurudere) village of Kemalpaşa in İzmir.

The art of *nazar boncuğu* making is a traditional occupation which is transmitted from generation to generation in the context of master-apprentice relationship. A master is required to be knowledgeable both in technical (heat, timing, materials, colors etc.) and design related aspects. This gives way to the reproduction and recreation of art.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, it is feared that their descendants may not carry on their craft.¹⁹ Hopefully it will be preserved in The Glass Furnace Foundation situated 25km north east of Istanbul near the Black Sea, close to the historical village of Ögümce. It is an Institute with international standards which offers students training in traditional glass making. Traditional *nazar boncuğu* furnaces are also built and training courses are initiated by Cam Ocağı Foundation in Istanbul.

In terms of the production process, *nazar boncuğu* craftsmanship is limited to specific areas. In terms of usage area, it is a widely used object against *nazar* (evil eye) all around Turkey.

Nazar belief and *nazarlık*

The demand behind the production of *nazar boncuğu* is the faith in *nazar*. Existing in cultures and beliefs of various societies, it is believed that the roots of *nazar* trace back to Neolithic times. *Nazar* is a scientifically unexplainable power believed to reside in the glance of some people and to direct harm at animate and inanimate objects. The beautiful, successful, happy and the wealthy are those usually “touched” by *nazar*. Since the looks of the beholder are thought to lie beneath *nazar*, the belief is also known as being “touched by the eye” or “affected by the eye”. Therefore, “beady eye” is another name given to *nazar boncuğu*.

Along with the *nazar* belief, the need to protect oneself from *nazar* has also emerged. To avoid *nazar*, a series of objects, known as *nazarlıks* are commonly used. Some of these *nazarlıks* are as follows: a horseshoe, and branches of various trees, turtle shell, egg shells, animal skulls, harmala seeds, *muska* (a kind of Islamic amulet) and objects with hand-eye figure. *Nazar boncuğu* is the most commonly used

¹⁸ O. Küçükerman, *Glass Beads. Anatolian Glass Bead Making*, Istanbul 1988, p. 30.

¹⁹ A. Akyüz, *Nazar Boncuğu. The Evil Eye Bead. The Reflections of an Ancient Anatolian Belief on Glass*, CD, 2002.

nazarlık. *Nazarlıks* are affixed visibly to animate and inanimate beings which may be affected by *nazar*. Using blue beads as *nazarlık* has long been a traditional practice in Turkish culture. Turks in ancient times used objects called “*boncuk-moncuk*”. Written in 11th century by Mahmoud Kashgari and recognized as the earliest Turkish dictionary, *Divanü Lügati’l Türk* cites *moncuk* as a kind of *muska* – Islamic amulet, in addition to several other meanings.

Evil eye and its contemporary usage in Turkey

In Turkey *nazar boncuğu* is regarded as one of the most significant elements of culture. It is believed to have a positive effect on the turning points of life, like birth, circumcision and marriage. Apart from special events, it is still customary to use it in daily life. One can see *nazar boncuğu* usage in brand new furniture, dowries, newborns, and on the gates and roofs of newly built houses. Almost in every house there is a *nazar boncuğu* or at least an object (table cloth, ornament etc.) with a figure of it. Many daily life items inspired by *nazar boncuğu* figure can be widely seen as decorative objects in modern day Turkey.

The Turkish evil eye is used in daily life not only in a form of beads. One can see its figure printed on seats covers in buses or painted on airplanes. The *nazar* image was used as a symbol on the tailfins of aeroplanes belonging to the private Turkish airline Fly Air.

Turkish symbol in intercultural dialogue

Besides being an item attributed to *nazar* belief, *nazar boncuğu* is first and foremost a traditional handicraft and a part of cultural identity. It should be emphasized that *nazar boncuğu* is used by all communities in Turkey, regardless of their ethnicity, religion and cultural background. Thus it can be considered a common means of communication for all populations in Turkey. *Nazar boncuğu* tradition plays a significant role in creating intercultural dialogue within the country. Moreover, it is one of the most popular souvenirs offered to tourists from abroad, as well as a traditional gift given to visitors coming to Turkey. Simple blue beads attracting interest with their symbolical aspect might be considered an instrument of dialogue between people from different cultural and social background. Further, in some souvenir items, the Turkish evil eye is even set into Christian imagery (Catholic and orthodox). One can see it attached to the images of Virgin Mary or Saints. Various modifications of the simple traditional form also include setting the *nazar* into the figures of elephants, cats or butterflies.

With contributions of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2002 *nazar boncuğu* was selected as a theme for one of the seven bottles in an exhibition of Coca-Cola Company titled as “Coca-Cola Bottles from Turkey”. After the exhibition, the bottle



2. Roman mosaic from Antiochia, House of the Evil Eye. Attacking the evil eye: the eye is pierced by a trident and sword, pecked by a raven, barked at by a dog and attacked by a centipede, scorpion, cat and a snake. Greek annotation "KAI SU" meaning "and you (too)". Hatay Arkeoloji Müzesi, Antakya.

Source: [on line] https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ac/Antiochia_-_House_of_the_Evil_Eye.jpg. December 2, 2015



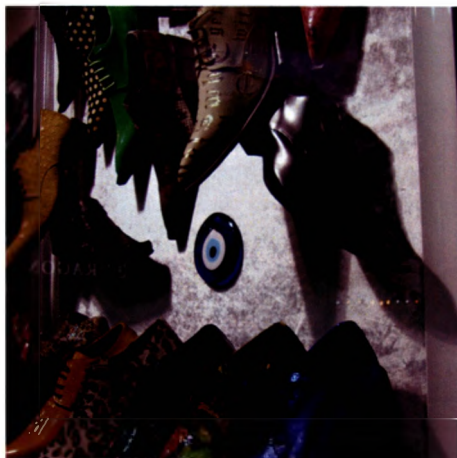
3. The traditional *nazar boncuğu* protecting house and its inhabitants, Istanbul, Turkey.

Author: Elzbieta Wiącek



4. The nazar boncuğu used in the logo for the video game CryEngine 3.

Source: [on line] <http://www.geek.com/games/crytek-is-portingcryengine-to-linux-1562557>. December 2, 2015



5. The evil eye bead protecting the shop and it's owner. Istanbul, Turkey.

Author: Elzbieta Wiącek



6. The *nazar boncuğu* symbol printed on textile protecting the bus. Marmaris, Turkey.
Author: Elżbieta Wiącek



8. The traditional *nazar boncuğu* set into Christian imagery and sold as a tourist souvenir, Istanbul, Turkey.
Author: Elżbieta Wiącek



7. The *nazar boncuğu* symbol on a Fly Air airplane, Sabiha Gökçen Airport, Istanbul, Turkey.

Source: [on line] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazar_%28amulet%29#mediaviewer/File:Nazar_boncu%C4%9Fu_tailfin.jpg, December 2, 2015



9. Logo of the 2013 FIFA U-20 World Cup.

Source: [on line] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013_FIFA_U-20_World_Cup, December 2, 2015

was sent to World of Coke Museum and thus reached greater visibility all across the world.

The use of an old symbol together with a global trademark is an illustration of the process of glocalization. The term “glocalization” – is a combination of the words “globalization” and “localization”.²⁰ It is used to describe a product or service that is developed and distributed globally, but is also fashioned to accommodate the consumer in a local market. In other words, this adaptation of a product or service conforms with local customs or consumer preferences. The phenomenon of glocalization is to some extent the opposite of americanization in that the former seeks to acknowledge local preferences and culture in products. Glocalization primarily encompasses how regional tendencies intersect with the proliferation of global corporations. The combination of Turkish evil eye with Coca-Cola logo means the co-presence of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies.

The popularity of *nazar boncuğu* has likewise crossed the border of Turkey. It is used in the logo for CryEngine 3, a game engine designed by Crytek, a German video game company founded in 1999 by three Turkish brothers (Cevat, Avni and Faruk Yerli).

Turkish “evil eye” was also used in the logo of the 2013 FIFA U-20 World Cup events. The fact that the official logo of such an prestigious, international event includes an evil eye protector, evidences its high importance in Turkish heritage.

Ancient symbol under official protection

The Republic of Turkey takes an active role in the activities concerning conservation and safeguarding of the traditional Turkish “evil eye” production with its techniques, methods and materials used. In 2008 The Commission of Experts in the Directorate General of Research and Training decided to include *nazar boncuğu* in Intangible Cultural Heritage National Inventory of Turkey. The *nazar boncuğu* masters are encouraged by providing them financial and technical assistance. A meeting was held on July 23rd 2009 under the coordination of İzmir Provincial Directorate of Ministry of Culture and Tourism. District governorships, the Center for Public Training, municipalities, NGOs, and practitioners of *nazar boncuğu* contributed to this meeting in which safeguarding measures were proposed. One of them was to suggest that the places where *nazar boncuğu* is produced through traditional techniques and methods will be put under protection. Intangible Cultural Heritage Museums related to this traditional art form were established in towns where production is still alive. The Ministry of National Education established centers for vocational training as well as issuing certificates of *nazar boncuğu* mastership. The Ministry of Culture

²⁰ The term first appeared in a late 1980s publication of the „Harvard Business Review”; see also: Ch.K. Sharma, “Emerging Dimensions of Decentralisation Debate in the Age of Globalisation”, *Indian Journal of Federal Studies* 2009, no. 19 (1), pp. 47-65.

and Tourism, in cooperation with district governorships, encourages new designs for *nazar boncuğu* while preserving the traditional characteristics and qualities. Design courses and contests are organized in villages. The purpose of these activities is to increase visibility/awareness, artistic creativity and artistic reproduction of Turkish “evil eye” tradition.

Conclusion

From Neolithic times the idea of a symbol protecting against evil eyes has persisted throughout the world into modern times. The presence of *nazar boncuğu* in daily life is the strong evidence of it. Why is the Turkish evil eye still such a popular symbol? The major reason why this symbol has become quite popular worldwide is that this amulet does not have any specific religious connection. People of all faiths, as well as people not belonging to a faith, have included the Turkish evil eye in their arsenal for personal protection. Scholarly discourse concerning the evil eye has given little attention to the religious system in which evil eye belief appeared.²¹ Besides, this symbol is associated with positive state of mind, such as purging of feelings of hatred and envy, sharing a unified spirit. In this respect, *nazar boncuğu* has a symbolical context emphasizing universal values.

²¹ R. Ulmer, *op. cit.*, p. VII (introduction).